

# Marxism Not Statism: *Autonomist Trajectories in the 21st Century*

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*Now it is seen that socialism in the sense of State-directed planned economy means state-capitalism, and that socialism in the sense of workers' emancipation is only possible as a new orientation.<sup>1</sup>*

—Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (1941-42)

**Since the life and times of Michael Bakunin, Karl Marx's theory of the state has been caricatured as "authoritarian" by a great many anarchists who have not understood it. At the same time, too many Marxists have accepted the premise by engaging in apologetics for the socialist state as an idea and historical practice.**

Throughout his many decades of writing, Michael Parenti has argued in defense of the socialist state as both an idea and historical practice, as can be seen in his *Contrary Notions* and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> More recently, in the celeb-Left theory of Jodi Dean, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou, the socialist state and the communist party have been making a peculiar kind of comeback, even including qualified apologetics for Stalin (especially in the works of Žižek and Badiou). In *The Communist Hypothesis*, Badiou argues against the consensus that the communist experiments of the 20th century were failures. He argues that the pervasive ideological narrative of the Cold War poisoned our ability to see anything but catastrophe and terror in the so-called communist regimes of the previous century. "Lumping together Stalin and Hitler was already a sign of extreme intellectual poverty."<sup>3</sup> And: "What exactly do we mean by 'failure' when we refer to a historical sequence that experimented with one or another form of the communist hypothesis? What do we mean when we say that all the socialist experiments that took place under the sign of that hypothesis ended in total 'failure'? Was it a complete failure?"<sup>4</sup> Badiou spends a large part of *The Communist Hypothesis* challenging the discourse of communist failure from the 20th century that we have inherited in the 21st.

Yet, by the end of the book, Badiou takes a position surprisingly close to this article's epigraph from Anton Pannekoek. On the word and idea of communism, Badiou concludes that "the word's function can no longer be that of an adjective, as in 'Communist Party', or 'communist regimes'. The Party-form, like that of the Socialist State, is no longer suitable for providing real support for the Idea."<sup>5</sup> In this, Badiou breaks from recent efforts to revitalize the Party-form and the Socialist State, problematizing the positions of his colleagues Dean and Žižek. Dean has been actively calling for a militant international communist party, for example, while Žižek staked great hopes in the Syriza party of Greece and in election cycles, and has argued disdainfully against all autonomist tendencies.<sup>6</sup>

But this wave of apologetics for the socialist state and the communist party has not pooled together with recent waves of insurrection that appear to occur in different waters. In recent years, we have seen multifarious and ideologically variegated uprisings around the world, some of which have overthrown governments, while others have changed conversations and given the experience of revolt to new generations. Waves of global uprising since 2008 have created real moments of recognition and realization of the social energies of everyday people capable of throwing the existing world into question. A central problem for the theories of Dean, Žižek, and Badiou, is that the communist desire that has been expressed in this recent insurrectionary activity is not calling for a communist party, has little faith in the state to solve the problems of everyday life, and makes no enduring connections to the communist projects of the previous century. It is one thing for theory to imagine itself in an advisory role for social movements, and another for theory to learn from them. I argue that theory always has more to learn from social movements than it has to teach them. And, if we are paying attention to actually-existing revolt in the world, and not forcing it into the frame of an ideological worldview (*weltanschauung*), then we simply cannot conclude that new uprisings want communist parties, socialist states, or any continuation of Soviet "experiments." This does not mean that there is no communist desire here. What we are seeing is what Pannekoek called for over seventy years ago, the emergence of "a new orientation."

This new orientation is more important now than ever before in the history of communist theory and action. Indeed, a new orientation seems almost inevitable. Ongoing vilifications of communism depend upon a conversation haunted by the specter of statist catastrophes.

I argue that we must bury the ideologized anarchist-Marxist debate, along with statism itself, as casualties of the 20th century. While autonomist Marxist trajectories offer the most promising pathways, they often retain too much of the old dichotomies that foreclose the use of important theoretical, historical, and political resources. I argue for a "precarious communism," which should not be confused with an acceptance of the whole fashionable discourse on precarity. Simply, precarious communism is a communism that self-consciously lacks confidence about some particular, alternative future:

(a) Precarious communism is communist on the grounds of its single most confident claim: A world organized by the logic of capital is a world set against the diverse interests of most people on Earth.

(b) Precarious communism is precarious inasmuch as it accepts that concrete proposals for new ways of being-in-the world will be differentially developed as nodal points within the contexts of actually-existing revolt.

What does it mean to be a precarious communist? It is something like being a non-ideological communist who is honest about the past, present, and the future. While ideology makes communism more confident, precarious communism is more philosophical, less ideological.

Communism today requires an open Marxism that synthesizes theoretical trajectories across the cleavages of left communist currents and anarchism. From Cornelius Castoriadis and Guy Debord, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to Antonio Negri, Franco Berardi, Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and John Holloway, efforts to unmoor communism from the ideological

encrustations of the 20th century are increasingly resonant. We can take it as good news that there is a growing appeal to what is called “communization theory,” although it is important to understand that such an approach has a long history in earlier left communist milieus, including in the works of Sylvia Pankhurst, Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Jacques Camatte, just to name some. These thinkers were doing a form of communization theory during and against the dominance of the Soviet Union and the Cold War narrative. It is not that so-called “communization theory” is new but, rather, that the meaning of communism has been decided against the favor of such communist currents, until now.

Marx famously declared that “theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”<sup>7</sup> It would seem that all of the statist transpositions of Marxism into the world had to reveal their total poverty before the conditions could be created for the ascendant Marxism of today. In the 1970s, Camatte wrote: “Forced to take account of the strength of the proletariat, Stalinist Russia had to disguise itself and realize the triumph of capital under the mask of socialism.”<sup>8</sup> Today, there appears to be little interest in a more convincing, or a more faithful, mask, and what we find in the 21st century is a widespread “post-socialist” sensibility that political parties are masks, and that states always wear them.

To accompany and support these sensibilities, from below, or this new *Gemeingest* of revolt, the whole heterogeneous bevy of the more marginal communist theorization must move from margin to center. There is what could be called a subaltern communist history of theory and practice to recover, a legacy of Marxism without statism. Can we not finally say that every good Marxist is more than a bit of an anarchist these days?<sup>9</sup>

Of course, we can’t reduce a long history of oppositions to nothing. The disagreements between Marx and

Proudhon, for example, raised critical questions in the debates of the 19th century that would take all of the next century to settle, and they have not yet been finally settled. But there is another history, less sordid and less scandalous, which has been eclipsed by strong personalities and rhetorical bluster.

Marx gave us the most systematic, rigorous, and exhaustive analysis of the history, tendencies, and crises of capitalism he was capable of producing in a single lifetime — all of his energies ultimately given over to that task. When one reads the anarchist literature contemporaneous with Marx and the Marxism of the early 20th century, certain things are undeniable. Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, and so many others, made dependable use of Marx’s analyses of capitalism, so much so that one could find them fully agreeable on at least three broad premises:

- (i) the impossibility of an acceptable capitalist world;
- (ii) the desirability and possibility of a different world organized on other principles or logics;
- (iii) the necessity of revolution, although many different and incompatible conceptions of revolution are at play throughout this history.

When one reads Errico Malatesta’s beautiful little book, *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism*, the analysis of capitalism and class follows Marx right up to the question of revolution, at which point Malatesta distinguishes his position in a discussion of “free communism.”<sup>10</sup> And while Bakunin had a famously tumultuous relationship with Marx, we cannot reduce that relationship to its oppositions alone. Bakunin joined the Geneva section of the First International, helped create new branches in Italy and Spain, and translated and circulated many of Marx’s works, including the first Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. One year after his expulsion from the International, Bakunin would admit: “Rarely can a man be found who knows so much and reads so much, and reads so intelligently, as Marx. Undoubtedly there is a good deal of truth in the merciless critique he directed against Proudhon.”<sup>11</sup> Proudhon advocated a different conception of revolution, which he thought would be more enduring, albeit slower. In his letter to Marx of May 17, 1846: “I would prefer to burn property slowly with a small fire than to give it new strength by carrying out a Saint Bartholomew’s Night of the Proprietors...”<sup>12</sup> Anarchists have long been capable of critiquing Marx, while crediting him for the foundation on which so much of anarchism rested.<sup>13</sup> As well, serious Marxist thinkers have long rejected major features of Marx’s arguments, a tradition that goes back at least to Paul Lafargue, to Antonio Gramsci’s essay “The Revolution Against *Capital*” and to Georg Lukács’ denouement of vulgar Marxists.

Despite this, stubborn old allergies persist. Consider a prominent example: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

have retained a strange insistence on distinguishing an ideological divide that dissolves in their own work. It is important to highlight the problem here, in the case of Hardt and Negri, because they are now among the most iconic representatives of Marxism without statism—especially Negri, who has written two autonomist Marxist manifestos.<sup>14</sup> Hardt and Negri declare that it is their time, as communists, to give voice to the cry “*Big government is over!*” They acknowledge the old socialistic aspiration to use government to redistribute wealth, and they confess: “*Today, however, those times are over.*” Hardt and Negri define the revolutionary aspiration of the multitude in terms of a quest for “*autonomous self-government.*”<sup>15</sup> No anarchist would disagree with that aspiration. Hardt and Negri know this well, and immediately anticipate the accusation that they are anarchists. They make the following pre-emptive rebuttal:

That is not true. We would be anarchists if we were not to speak (as did Thrasymachus and Callicles, Plato’s immortal interlocutors) from the standpoint of a materiality constituted in the networks of productive cooperation, in other words, from the perspective of a humanity that is constructed productively, that is constituted through the “common name” of freedom. No, we are not anarchists but communists who have seen how much repression and destruction of humanity have been wrought by liberal and socialist big governments.<sup>16</sup>

What is “the standpoint of a materiality constituted in the networks of productive cooperation?” What is “the perspective of a humanity that is constructed productively?” Hardt and Negri mean that they are not anarchists because they accept the materialist premises of Marx’s political-economy. It is thus reasonable to assume that they have not read the rich history of anarchism in which those very premises are also accepted, a history in which such premises are often accepted with a self-conscious debt to Marx. The perspective of a humanity constructed productively can be found throughout the history of anarchism, in the diverse writings of Lucy Parsons, Peter Kropotkin, Charlotte Wilson, and Rudolph Rocker, just to name some examples.

There is nothing to take seriously in Hardt and Negri’s peculiar insistence that they “*are not anarchists but communists who have seen the repression and destruction wrought by liberal and socialist big governments.*” Anarchists have long been communists who have seen how much repression and destruction of humanity have been wrought by governments. Indeed, the anarchist pre-science about such repression and destruction defined them in the 19th century, when their theory of power only looked like a fearful wager, and vindicated them in the 20th century, when it looked like a prophecy.

Why does this matter? Because ongoing ideological dichotomies continue to haunt and over-determine the development of new autonomist Marxisms, which do not then make use of the theoretical, historical, and political resources of other anti-capitalist tendencies. Thus, the purported heterodoxy of open Marxism is belied by the

fact that it remains a too-narrow enclosure.

To be fair, many anarchists have made worse mistakes when it comes to ideologizing the divide between communist forms. Many anarchists have become so sectarian that they’ve produced a little cottage industry of anarchist broadsides against anarchists.<sup>17</sup> As well, in much of the anarchist press, there is a misguided sense that taking any bit of Marxism seriously is tantamount to ideological betrayal.

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari famously discuss the body without organs (BwO), an idea borrowed from Antonin Artaud, and made to mean a plane of indeterminacy, of open possibilities, a terrain of our becoming, of our fighting, of our losing and winning, a terrain on which we see ourselves as a body without organs. “Every coupling of machines, every production of a machine, every sound of a machine running, becomes unbearable to the body without organs. Beneath its organs it senses that there are larvae and loathsome worms, and a God at work messing it all up or strangling it by organizing it.”<sup>18</sup> Organs define the purposes of a body as a specific kind of machine, its constitutive parts make up a reference for what that machine can do, what it is designed for. For the human machine, for the question of what we can do or what we are made for, this comes down to a question of purposes. The BwO points to a politics of subversive repurposing. The point is: We can rethink our purposes, and not leave the question up to God, to the mode of production, or to any ideological tradition.

Guattari was especially interested in the politics of subversion. He wrote about “becoming-woman” with an understanding of the subversive repurposing of gender.<sup>19</sup> A body without organs is a subject that is subject to change. In the political context of precarious communism, we need a communism as the body without organs of the “communists,” that is, we need a new communist becoming, a becoming-ungovernable, as we could imagine Guattari might say.

What is the empirical side of this? If we look at the major post-Cold War uprisings over the past twenty years, from 1994 to 2014, from the uprising of the Mexican Zapatistas to the more recent insurrectionary activity in the Middle Eastern and North African countries south of the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in Greece, Spain, Turkey, and Brazil, we see that actually-existing revolt has turned away from the question of administrative modes of problem-solving. For a brief moment in Egypt it might have appeared that Morsi was the answer to Mubarak, but it is now clear that—in Egypt and elsewhere—revolutionary politics is less about governance than about processes of becoming ungovernable.

Precarious communism has what might be called an “open hope” for an everyday life of dignity, autonomy, and association and for none of their capitalist substitutes — like cultural commons in a shopping mall, as was proposed for Gezi Park and Taksim Square. Actually-existing revolt in recent years has expressed just such an

“open hope” and has helped prepare a graveyard for orthodoxies. That they do not speak with one brain does not mean that the insurrections in Greece, Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, and elsewhere do not speak at all. They speak volumes about sovereignty, democracy, neoliberalism,

economic crisis, and structural transformation, among other things, and concrete proposals do come out of them. It is precisely this content that theorists should attend to, for it is there, in the graveyard for orthodoxies, where the communist hypothesis really comes to life.

## Notes

1. Pannekoek, Anton, *Workers' Councils in Left Communism Reader* (Prism Key Press, 2013), p. 433.
2. Parenti, Michael, *Contrary Notions* (City Lights Books, 2007).
3. Badiou, Alain, *The Communist Hypothesis* (Verso Books, 2010), p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
6. Dean, Jodi, “The Party and Communist Solidarity” at the Eighth International Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, MA, September 21, 2013 and Žižek, Slavoj, “On the Role of the European Left” at the 6th Subversive Festival, Zagreb, Croatia, May 15, 2013.
7. Marx, Karl, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, (Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1843]), p. 133.
8. Camatte, Jacques, *Capital and Community*, (Prism Key Press, 2011), p. 203.
9. Perhaps this was already true in Marx's time, as could be argued in the case of Paul Lafargue.
10. Malatesta, Errico, *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism* (Freedom Press, 2005), p. 65.
11. Bakunin, Michael, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 142.
12. Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph, “Letter to Karl Marx” in *Property Is Theft!* (AK Press, 2011), p. 164.
13. See also “Bakunin's Reminiscence” of Marx in *The Portable Karl Marx* (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 26 and Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* (Dover, 2003).
14. The two “manifestos” I am referring to are *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* (Polity Press, 2005) and, with Félix Guattari, *New Lines of Alliance, New Spaces of Liberty* (Autonomedia, 2010).
15. Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 349.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
17. See, for example, the published record of disputes between Murray Bookchin, John Zerzan, Bob Black, Hakim Bey, etc.
18. Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Penguin Books, 2009), p. 9.
19. See Guattari, “Becoming-Woman” in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader* (Semiotext(e), 2001).

## Fukushima Rising Headnotes

above ground  
swaying precariously  
on twisted stilts

in a building swamped broken  
crumpled fuel rod pods  
requiring constant re-watering

a nuclear death pool  
a great sword radiant  
suspended over all

subject to the shakes  
wind water earth breaks  
dread miscalculation

below burning underground  
those 3 nuke hot reactor cores  
lost coriums somewhere or other

awaiting the shining the falling  
uncontrollable chain reactions  
the madness the crying the dying

Fukushima  
Fukushima  
Fukushima Rising

## Clearer Brighter Sight

Hope You & Yours  
Your place your surroundings  
Are all OK unhurt unharmed  
By the waters the wind  
The elemental fierceness of  
This typhoon's dump run & grin

Nice days these  
for alertness for listening  
for clarity of energy of view  
for aka Wine slowly sipped  
quietly celebrating life's  
cacophonous continuation  
raucous renewal  
passionate edginess  
still respectful  
of the waters the storm

—AJ Dickinson

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